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FROM **S.C. SHAW** UNCLE SAM'S
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COFFEE CULTURE IN OLAH.

Dr. Russel Thinks There is Still a
Chance for Coffee Culture.

EDITOR TRIBUNE:

After a long period of low prices
in coffee, which is not over yet, one
must reasonably expect a period of
high ones. This law, familiar to
every student of the world market,
is applicable to all products, espe-
cially those that are the object of
consumption of the masses. Re-
cently we had a new illustration of
that law in reference to sugar prices.

In view of such probability it is
opportune to review once more the
question of the causes of failure to
raise coffee in Olah district. The
coffee industry in this district has
already proved to be of consider-
able consequence to Hilo town, and
Hilo citizens are not less interested
in it than the planters themselves.

A few years ago Mr. R. Rycroft
was visiting Olah inquiring into the
causes of failure for the benefit of a
large firm, that had large interests
in coffee here. My answer to that
query was that failure is due to
chemical composition of our red and
yellow subsoils, containing consid-
erable iron in the shape of the poi-
sonous suboxide. This opinion was
based on the observations made
upon my forty acre field of 4 to 5
year old coffee, which had a prom-
ising appearance in the beginning,
but at the time stated looked as
poorly as the most of coffee planta-
tions around. I have pulled twenty-
five acres on that field, in order to
plant cane, but have left one row
for further experiments. In pull-
ing the trees, I have noticed that
almost without exception they had
their tap roots turned up. It looked
as if those roots, after reaching the
subsoil, could not sink any farther
and have reverted to the surface
soil again. Trees prospered as
long as their roots have remained
in the surface soil, where they had
something to feed upon. When
this small, thin layer became ex-
hausted, trees gave out, began to
spindle and dry, losing their pri-
maries. Evidently the subsoil
either did not contain any nutritious
elements essential for coffee trees,
or contained some substance poi-
sonous to that plant. The first theory
could not hold, considering that
many other trees and plants with
deep roots, like all conifers, bam-
boo, silver oaks, etc., grew luxur-
iantly in the same subsoil. The
theory of the poisonous substance
was more probable, and the only
such substance found in the soil
was the suboxide of iron. While
oxide of iron is considered either
indifferent or even useful and neces-
sary to the plant life, suboxide is
decidedly injurious—great many
plants cannot grow even with a
slight percentage of it in the soil.

The third theory of "acid" soil
was altogether untenable. First,
because I could not detect any free
acid in the subsoil in question.
Second, because such acids (in
other soils) being humic acids, pro-
duct of rotting vegetation, are the
most abundant in black, superficial
humus. With us this humus proved
to be an excellent nutritious ground
as long as it lasted. Third, be-
cause all those acids are easily sol-
uble, and with the abundant rain-
fall in this district, every trace of
them would have been dissolved
and carried away.

The only remedy against the sub-
oxide is the repeated turning up
and aerating of the subsoil by
plowing.

But at this juncture another
question arose: Coffee has two
systems of roots, surface ones and
the tap root. While plowing could
provide abundantly of available
soil for the surface roots, it evi-
dently could not do it for the tap
root, sinking several feet down,
cannot be plowed so deep.

In such circumstances we have
been compelled to give up our coffee
plantations, price or no price, and
pass to banana and cane planting.
The difficulty was unsurmountable.

Having still fifteen acres of coffee
on my homestead, which I was re-
luctant to sacrifice, I concentrated
my attention upon the one row left
for experimenting upon in the sac-
rificed twenty five acre field. This
whole field intended for cane and

bananas, was cleared of stumps,
plowed and cross-plowed several
times in the way, as if there was no
row of coffee trees left. The plow
was run very close to the coffee
trees, that looked as poorly and
dying as was the rest of the field.
Thus the roots have been heavily
pruned.

A year after plowing, and with-
out the use of fertilizers, to my
surprise the row of coffee trees has
recovered entirely, has resumed its
luxuriant appearance, sent off new
sets of primaries, blossomed and is
bearing now a moderate amount of
berries. It promises a 'full next
crop. This was encouraging, and
recently I applied a mixture of
potash and bone meal around every
tree.

This experiment makes me think
that the part the tap-root plays with
coffee is only to secure water from
the depth, where it has to go after
it in its native dry and arid country.
In a rainy district like ours, where
soil is always moist, this root is
unnecessary and its fate immaterial.
Important alone is the system of sur-
face roots, whose function is the
providing of food. Therefore all
that is necessary to insure the lon-
gevity and prosperous condition of
a coffee tree in Olah is to improve
1-1 1/2 foot of the upper soil to feed
the tree. This can be effected by
plowing, which transforms the
poisonous suboxide into an indiffer-
ent oxide, and by superficial fertiliz-
ing with potash, bone meal and
lime around each tree. On the
ground of this I would suggest
that those, who still own coffee
plantations in our district, should
repeat my experiment on a few
rows of their worst coffee trees,
where soil is not rocky and admits
plowing.

Of course, the first expenses con-
nected with pulling stumps and re-
peated plowing will be larger, but
the keeping of the plantation clean
with the harrow is so much cheaper
than by hoe and hand, and what is
the most important the results may
be entirely different.

As for the question of shade,
while I believe in its good effects, I
do not think it is essential. The
irritant effects of direct solar rays
upon the coffee tree, inducing it to
excessive and early bearing, is the
only drawback of no shade. In the
shade the tree develops slower and
bears more timely and sparingly.
But when one succeeds to insure
abundant nutrition to its roots by
improving the soil, the no shade
situation will have no evil effects.
The best shade plant would be
some variety of tall marketable
bananas, like Cuban, placed in such
a way as not to interfere with har-
rowing and cultivation.

NICHOLAS RUSSEL.

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